

## Holy Conversations: What is “missional” and why does it matter?

Scripture readings (non-lectionary) OT: Isaiah 58:6-9

NT: 2 Cor. 5:17-20 Gospel: Luke 4:18-21

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to be the message bearer this morning. I'm especially delighted to have the chance to talk about the concept of what is “missional” and why does it matter?

I've structured the title carefully in that order, with the definition first and the more functional, visceral question of, “*why does it matter?*” second. But being rather postmodern in my orientation, I actually much prefer to begin at the end and talk first about why it matters.

This is an issue that's been important to me for some time. In fact, as a person, I think I'm somewhat missionally oriented in life. This could be simply because I'm created that way by my Maker, or shaped that way by formative experiences. I think it's a combination of both.

I remember one early experience that impressed upon me just why “mission” can matter so much. I joined the wrestling team in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Now, I have to give you the mental picture of me as a seventh grader. I was what we now call an “endomorph.” I was all bones and skin. No discernible muscle anywhere on my body. This was compounded by the fact that I have this abnormally large head. (I know, some of you have been thinking this all along. It's okay, really.) So the picture of me you have to see in your mind's eye is that of a lollipop. Not a great way to go through jr. high school. So my decision to join the wrestling team was not out of any sense of destiny, that I would discover something I was meant to do. I just thought I'd try it. Some of my friends were doing it and I thought it might be fun.

And it was—for about the first five minutes. During the first practice, we warmed up with some jumping jacks and a few stretches. What proceeded from there was a physical test of endurance more grueling than I could have even imagined. Push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, crunches, neck bridges, and core exercises all came at my endomorphic body in painful succession for a full hour. Then, once the conditioning part of practice had turned all my limbs to rubber, we'd get down to the real business of learning to wrestle. The next hour would be spent practicing take-downs, ground moves, pins, escapes, all with live opponents. It was absolutely exhausting. And then on Fridays, we'd run a bonus mile after practice just for fun!

I hung with it for the first week, not sure I really liked it. The second week was okay, I was learning new things. The third week was fine, I guess. But it was hard. And it was getting harder as the season was fast approaching. The coaches were getting us ready for the first meet at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> week. At the end of the fourth week, I went to practice one day not feeling well. I had a cold. This was the day the coach decided we were going to run extra stairs. I did it. I did it all. And at the end of practice, with my chest heaving and my head pounding, I decided I'd had enough. **I just didn't see the point** of all the hard work and pain. I cleaned out my locker and left. I never went back.

I felt a little bit of a twinge about quitting the team, about not finishing what I'd started. But I comforted myself with the knowledge that I'd worked through the hardest stuff the coach would be throwing at the team. And, I'd done a decent job of learning some of the technical rudiments of the sport. Specifically, I'd learned some great pin moves—I still remember them and occasionally use them on Aidan. But still, **I just didn't see the point in continuing.**

A few weeks later I ran into a kid I'd met on the team. Several wrestling meets had already gone by; I hadn't gone to any of them. One day in the cafeteria, this friend asked me, "So why did you leave the team?"

"Well," I said honestly, "the practices were really hard, and I just didn't see the point."

My friend told me flatly that I'd left at just the wrong time. After the meets began it all got better. He went on to explain (in his own way) how the experience of competing in the meets had made all the conditioning, all of the technical skill development, all the hard work begin to make sense. That without the wrestling meets themselves, all the conditioning and training really *didn't* make sense. In fact, lots of people were thinking about quitting at the same time I did. But the ones that stayed learned a valuable lesson: the mission of competing in these meets together, as a team, made sense out of all the difficult conditioning, all of the technical learning, all of the sore muscles, all of the stair-running.

This is my earliest memory of why mission matters. And some years later it became a helpful analogy for me. Because the church, it seems to me, can struggle with a similar issue. We can become so focused on the conditioning, so focused on the technical learning that we lose sight of its purpose, we lose sight of the *mission*. We get around to thinking that our *only* purpose in all of this is to *acquire* the technical knowledge and to *repeat* the conditioning exercises. And so we carefully refine what we believe, and we study doctrine and creed. We come to church, some of us even invite others to come with us. We work to raise our children in the church. And in and of themselves, *these are very good things*. The problem is, I would contend, that none of these things really describe the mission of God. And significant problems arise when we try to live out our faith absent of any meaningful mission.

The way I see it, there are at least two significant problems that arise from a Christianity with no discernible mission:

- 1. Without a mission, too many of us wake up at some point in our faith journey asking the question, "What's the point?"**

- (Just like the young wrestler.) And—it's a good question! It's the right question! But often our churches don't have a meaningful answer to offer. Perhaps another bible study, a focus on the attributes of God, a different style of worship, a Taize service

will quell the feeling for a while. (Again, all of these are good things, but they are not a substitute for mission.)

2. There's a second problem when we try to do church without mission. **Because many of us are essentially missionally oriented people, if we don't join the mission of God in some real way, we run the risk of fixating our lives (wasting our lives) on some other, lesser mission.**
  - At best this mission simply won't matter in the world because it won't matter to God. And we simply waste our created potential and purpose.
  - But at worst this other mission can be downright damaging to ourselves, our neighbors and to the reputation of God and God's people.

The history of the church is simply full of examples of all kinds of mission. In fact, as I've thought back over the messages in this series, it strikes me that one way we can distinguish between the historical figures we've talked about is by thinking about the kind of mission they were on. Was it the mission of God? Was it some other, lesser mission?

Take a look at this brief overview. We could think about the mission of:

- **[slide 1] Constantine** and his drive to unite church and state and meld both missions into one.
- **Crusades** and their mission to re-capture the Holy Land
- **[slide 2] St. Francis of Assisi** and his simple mission "To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in his footsteps."
- **Conquistadors** and their state sponsored mission to convert heathens far and wide
- **[slide 3] Torquemada** and the mission of the Spanish Inquisition to convert, expel or exterminate heathens in Spain
- **Menno Simons** and his mission of reform to point followers of Jesus back to the importance of *actually following Jesus in daily life*. This was, as Del pointed out a couple of weeks ago, a "rare and daring" call in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.
- **[slide 4] Martin Luther** and his courageous, large scale effort to reform the church and his direct opposition to
- **Pope Leo X and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V** who despite their bankrupt, divided papacy were much more interested in "mission as usual" or perhaps "Missio quo"
- **[slide 5] Adoniram Judson** as the archetypal career missionary of his time, and the first Western missionary to Burma
- **William Wilberforce** and his clear sense of mission to introduce his anti-slavery bill in British Parliament every year for 17 years until it finally passed
- **[slide 6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer** and his sense of mission to engage the Nazi war machine
- **Father Coughlin** and his sense of mission as an anti-Semitic preacher
- **[slide 7] Jerry Falwell** and his clear mission for a "moral majority"
- The recent advent of the **Short-Term Mission Trip**
- **[slide 8] Billy Graham**

- **Mother Teresa**
- **[slide 9-blank] ...and the list goes on**

If you're like me, this list is a little confusing. I think, perhaps, for all of us in the church it's a little confusing—some of it is, perhaps embarrassing, even distressing. And I think it's even more challenging for those *outside* the church. So all of this begs the question: What is missional?!? (And the modernists finally begin to relax! Because it sounds like we may actually get to a definition!!)

The best place to begin a definition, of course, would be to turn to the scriptures. Today's (non-lectionary) readings suggest that the scriptures offer a clear missional command:

**Isaiah** promises that if we join in God's mission of loosing the bonds of injustice, feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless poor, then a host of almost unbelievable promises are offered us.

Paul reminds us in **2 Corinthians 5** that if we are "in Christ," then it becomes our mission to be "ambassadors for Christ" so that God can make his appeal to the world through us.

Jesus seems to state his mission this way

**[slide 10] Luke 4:18, 19**

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

And in terms of mission, Jesus sums the question up for us in Luke 10's Samaritan story with: Love God and Love Neighbor.

**[slide 11]** Certainly this simple mission has been confused over Christian history, but Let me summarize with the following comments on that history, or at least the more recent portions of it in the following very broad strokes:

- The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a virtual explosion of what became known as "modern missions." Western missionaries left their home countries to spend their lives fulfilling Paul's call to serve as God's "ambassadors of reconciliation."
- These missions were launched at great personal risk and sacrifice. The average life-span of such a missionary was not very long.
- By and large, these missions were certainly an improvement over the crusades, the conquistadors, or the inquisition, but still were laden with cultural trappings that were at best a distraction and at worst damaging to the core missional endeavor.
- And, they saw the formation of the church as the end-point of mission. This is more problematic than it may seem.

- Midway through the last century, a re-thinking of what it means for the church to be missional was spearheaded by people like Leslie Newbegin, an Anglican missionary to India, who, upon his return to the UK after his 20 years abroad found the West to be (or have become) post-Christian, pluralistic and essentially pagan. In essence, he returned home from the “mission field” to discover that “home” had become...another “mission field.”
- At the very least, this blurred the distinction between “home country” and “mission field”
- In 1952, at a conference in Germany, Newbegin and others further clarified what they felt were short comings of the modern mission movement. They agreed that the church was not, in fact, the center of mission, nor was it the endpoint or goal of mission. Broader than that, they affirmed that mission was rooted in the triune God.
- This idea was referred to as *missio Dei* or mission of God. And as missiologist David Bosch puts it: “...this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation. [this] image of mission was mission as participating in the sending of God.”

In an attempt to clarify these important paradigm shifts, contemporary Irish Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright wrote an excellent book simply, and perhaps ambitiously, titled *The Mission of God*. He states in the introduction that he wrote the book after several years of teaching a seminary class entitled, “The Biblical Basis of Missions.” Increasingly, Wright felt that this statement was inherently flawed, or even backward. The class he wanted to teach was not “The biblical basis of mission,” but “the missional basis of the Bible.” (Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 22)

Mission is not some optional, extracurricular activity. To follow God *means* to join God in God’s mission to the world—a mission which is already in progress.

And so, I will at last offer a definition—or I will offer Wright’s definition of what mission, and therefor missional might mean **[slide 12]**:

*Mission...is our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.*  
(Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 23)

It’s initiated by God. It’s bigger than the Church. It’s broader than mere evangelization. And it’s not limited to just a few of us. **[slide 13]**

There exists now a missional church movement in the US. It seeks to empower churches to join in God’s mission to the world. It seeks to deepen the church’s theology and practice around the issue of mission. As I read their material, however, I do have to confess that I hear in it echoes of other voices, particularly some of my own theological influences from places like Latin America. Contemporary theologians like Rene Padilla who are, from my perspective, the grandfathers of this movement. This is at least in part due to their having up dealing with significant social challenges in their context. Challenges such as rampant poverty, extensive corruption, chronically unstable

governments, ubiquitous violence. Rene and his colleagues never saw the question of mission as optional. And they never had the luxury of narrowing the church's mission very far. For it seemed insufficient for them to simply escape the perils of their context without thinking seriously about engaging the suffering these perils were causing their neighbors.

Rene talks about this trend toward *missio Dei*, the mission of God, as a move toward *integral mission*. He talks about it as a re-integration of things that never should have been separated. Because if we think about it, what we have in the older "missions" paradigm are a series of inherently false dichotomies.

[slide 14] For example, dichotomies between:

1. [click-build] Christian "Homeland" and [click-build] The Mission Field
2. [click-build] Sending Churches and [click-build] Receiving Churches
3. [click-build] Missionaries and [click-build] "Ordinary" Christians
4. [click-build] Mission and [click-build] "Ordinary" Life
5. [click-build] Word and [click-build] Deed

*Missio Dei*, or *Integral Mission* or the *Missional Movement* offers [slide 15] more helpful paradigms:

1. Instead of *Christian "Homeland" and The Mission Field*:
  - [slide 16] All the world is a mission field. And every human need is an opportunity for the manifestation of the transforming power of the Kingdom of God.
2. Instead of *Sending Churches and Receiving Churches*
  - [slide 17] All churches are sending and receiving churches
3. Instead of *Missionaries and "Ordinary" Christians*
  - [slide 18] All Christians are called to follow Jesus in daily life and to lead a missional lifestyle wherever they are.
4. Instead of *Mission and "Ordinary" Life*
  - [slide 19] Everything we do needs to make sense in light of the mission of God and the Kingdom of God
5. Instead of *Word and Deed*
  - [slide 20] All the church is, does, and says is included in the witness to Jesus as the Lord of everyone and everything.

So I hope all this information is helpful on some level. But let me issue a caution: Learning the technical aspects of what it means to be missional is not the same thing as joining in the mission of God.

Lest we be like the young wrestler who quits before the actual wrestling meet, we must turn consciously to the question: What does this mean to us? What does it mean for WCF? For my family? For me? Because all of us are invited into this broader mission of God. All of us are *in*.

I can't answer that question corporately for us (though I hope I can stimulate some conversation). But I might suggest a couple of reasons it's important for us to figure out. So, in an attempt to do that, let me close with two benefits of this missional lifestyle and one further caution.

**The first benefit has to do with *deepening faith and trust in God*.**

Like Christians all over the developed world, most of us in the US, most of us at WCF have a special set of challenges. Most of us who grow up under the benefits of even minimal affluence can become addicted to the resulting security. In fact, we so gravitate toward **safety** and **security** that it can become our undoing. And the sad thing is, our Enemy has us pursuing a lie. *We* can never actually make *ourselves* safe or secure. But we can spend our lives, waste our lives, pouring ourselves into the task in a way that distracts us from any other mission.

So, becoming missional people, being a missional church, this is a necessary aspect of our development as disciples, as people of faith. Until our faith is actually tested by the significant challenge of mission, how do we know that it is rally faith at all? When our missional lifestyle compels us into situations so far beyond our safe and secure zones, far beyond our own abilities—this is where we learn to trust God.

**The second benefit has to do with *a hope of unity*.**

We've spent so much time over the history of the church carefully measuring what we believe. We gather around similar beliefs, divide over doctrinal issues. But this has so often been done without regard to the *mission* of the church. Focusing solely on belief can be divisive. But focusing on mission can unite disparate groups within a wider orthodoxy. For example, at IJM we regularly see our Protestant and Catholic staff working and worshipping together all over the world. IJM staff regularly report that this is the first time this has ever happened in their lives, that previously they did not believe the other was an authentic Christian—and that if they hadn't united around their common justice mission (*missio Dei*), it never would have happened. And frankly this is something I've always loved about our life together at WCF. There are lots of different people here who believe different things. But one very positive vestige of our missional life as a congregation, as that, despite our differences, we have banded together in our mission.

**My final caution has to do with *the potential to stray*.**

Just as churches and Christians can attempt to live a life of faith without mission, the opposite is equally disastrous. There are several prominent cases in history of missional groups who have strayed from their foundations of faith. It can sometimes happen that our focus on the mission of God can drift—and that we can latch on to a portion of God's mission while at the same time letting go of the God of Mission. The mission itself becomes the sum total of organizational focus. The mission of God becomes *our* mission without God and the organization comes unmoored. These are sad stories. They are cautionary tales about keeping the life of faith and the work of mission fully integrated.

## Conclusion

You know. I think I would have made a terrible wrestler. But I did learn an important lesson. A wrestler is not a wrestler simply because he's learned some wrestling technique. And a physician is not a physician simply because she *understands* medicine. It is the *practice* of medicine that makes her a physician. Similarly, trying to live this life of faith without actually joining the mission of God is not only *hard*, at some point it actually stops making sense. From my perspective being missional, or consciously and actively participating in the mission of God, is a vital aspect of our life as individual Christians and our life as a congregation. It is both the proof of what we believe and a catalyst for deepening those beliefs. And I welcome the conversation that will follow this series.